

MASONIC EDUCATION VS. MASONIC APATHY

By Bro. Warren B. Smith

Our fathers to their graves have gone; Their strife is past, their triumph won But sterner
trials wait the race Which rises in their honored place, A moral warfare with the crime And
folly of an evil time.

THESE lines were written by John Greenleaf Whittier at a time when the issue of negro slavery was last becoming the leading factor in the irreconcilable conflict that was to plunge our country into the throes of the great Civil War. Yet, we, of today, must look far for a clearer statement of the present-day conditions which are daily becoming more and more intolerable.

In the discussion of Masonic Education or of Masonic Apathy or, again, of any combination of the two, it is impossible to evade the association of Masonic with civic obligation. The Mason who is apathetic is quite likely to be an apathetic citizen; the Mason who is true to his full Masonic heritage is certain to be a good citizen. Therefore, whether I quote Masonic authority or civic philosophy it is, for the present purpose, one and the same thing.

It is sometimes a comfort to realize that such problems and conditions as those afflicting us do not differ from, in fact they are quite largely identical with, the experiences of another day and generation. In 1868, John Ruskin, in a speech before the Royal College of Science at Dublin, expressed himself as follows:

To those among us who have lived long enough to form some just estimate of the rate of the changes which are, hour by hour, in accelerating catastrophe, manifesting themselves in the laws, the arts and the creeds of men, it seems to me that now at least, if never at any former time, the thoughts of the true nature of our life, and its powers and responsibilities, should present themselves with absolute sadness and sternness.

Ruskin was particularly interested in the arts. We are particularly interested in Masonry. But could you draw a closer parallel, in a sober statement of your convictions? Does Ruskin overstate the case of our present situation? Listen to this quotation from an anti- Masonic paper issued in 1828:

Every age has its wonders - and every time its turn. Posterity looks back, up the current of departed years, amazed that her ancestors were so weak and unwise. Such a speculative retrospect, a hundred years hence, will afford a curious sight, if any should step onto the promontory of time and view the deserted temples where Masonry once was. . .

The animus behind this prophecy does not here concern us, but does the fact of Masonic membership statistics and the attendance record in your lodge during 1928 startle you, when you read this prophecy of a hundred years ago?

With so much of introduction, let us consider briefly two elements of strength with which our great Fraternity is blessed beyond any other similar organization. These two great assets are, first, **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**, and second, **ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES**.

In an historical review of Masonry, three general themes present as many similar, and at the same time radically different, theories. It is beside the present purpose to argue for the greater authenticity of one or the other view. Parenthetically, the three theories in mind are the so-called Comacine Theory; that theory which holds that from time immemorial all men who have endeavored to follow the high principles for which we now stand in essence have been Masons; the incontrovertible historical sequence of Modern Masonry. The first- named is briefly summarized here for the simple reason that it affords a more striking illustration of the fact that Masonry has a deep-rooted background. The following summary is from Bro Ravenscraft:

1. Centuries before Christ and the founding of Rome, a race of Hametic descent spread along the Mediterranean shores, and afterward became known in Syria and Asia Minor as Hittites; in Greece as Pelasgoi, and in Italy as Etruscans.
2. Hittites were engaged in building the Temple of Jerusalem, the fame of which spread far and wide.
3. The Romans learned their arts of building, decoration, pottery, etc., from the Etruscans, who were the same race as the Hittites, and carried with them some, at least, of their traditions.
4. In Rome there developed Collegia of artificers and, in early Christian days, these had traditions of King Solomon.
5. At the downfall of Rome, the Guild of Artificers left and settled in the district of Como, holding as their center the island of Comicina.
6. Thence they spread their influence over all of Western Europe, and even to the English shores.
7. They merged into the great Masonic Guilds of the Middle Ages.
8. As these Guilds died out, their forms and ceremonies were preserved to a great extent in our Masonic lodges - at any rate, under those of the English and American constitutions.

So much, to suggest the vast background of Masonry, the main point at issue being merely to show that more recently organized fraternal or service organizations could not go so far, except through the intermediate experience of Masonry. As to essential principles, no adequate treatment of so large a topic could be considered within the limits of our present discussion. But to conform to our general theory of background, your attention is called to the practical identity between the old English and our present American Charges. By the Charge of 1723:

A Mason is obliged, by his Tenure, to obey the moral law; and if he rightly understands the Art, he will never be a stupid Atheist nor an irreligious Libertine. But though in ancient times Masons were charged in every country to be of the religion of that country or nation, whatever it was, yet it is now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that religion in which all men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves, that is, to be Good men and True, or men of Honor and Honesty, by whatever Denomination or Persuasion

they may be distinguished, whereby Masonry becomes the Center of Union and the Means of Conciliating true Friendship among persons that must have remained at a perpetual distance.

But besides obeying the moral law, the old-time Mason was to be constantly observant of his civic duties. The Charge continues:

As a citizen of the world, I am next to enjoin you to be exemplary in the discharge of your civil duties, by never proposing, or at all countenancing, any act that may have a tendency to subvert the peace and good order of society; by paying due obedience to the laws of any state which may for a time become the place of your residence, or afford you its protection; and, above all, by never losing sight of the allegiance due to the sovereign of your native land; ever remembering that nature has implanted in your breast a sacred, indissoluble attachment to that country from which you derived your birth and infant nature.

In recent numbers of THE BUILDER have appeared discussions under the following heads: Where Are we Drifting ? The Length of the Cable Tow; Catching Them Young; Are You a True and Royal Builder? Underlying these is a question that is pertinent to all comment, editorial and otherwise, on the difficulties under which Masonic Lodges are not laboring. I frame it thus: **To Whom Are These Questions Addressed?** And you can but answer: **To the individual Mason.** While that is true, it needs somewhat of elaboration.

What is the duty of a Worshipful Master? There used to be a favorite treatise on *The Whole Duty of Man*. What if this question be: What Is the Whole Duty of a Worshipful Master? It is much more suggestive.

Eighty years ago, a certain Church of England clergyman, Dr. George Oliver, amid his other multifarious literary labors, spent a good share of his time in writing letters to various lodges and Masons, and I should like to quote him here on this matter of the duty of the Master:

The peculiar appropriation of the SQUARE [is] to the Master of a private lodge.... In operative Masonry [it is] used to adjust all irregular corners and bring rude matter into due form ., . while to the Speculative Mason it conveys a corresponding lesson of duty, teaching him that by a course of judicious training the Worshipful Master reduces into due form the rude matter which exists in the mind of a candidate for initiation; and thus, being modelled on the true principles of genuine Masonry, it becomes like the polished corners of the Temple. And by virtue of this jewel, which sparkles on his breast, he is enabled to cause all animosities . . . to subside, that order and good fellowship should be perfect and complete. The Master of a lodge is therefore bound to set his brethren an example of Morality and Justice, which form the true interpretation of the Significant Jewel by which he is distinguished.

There speaks the old English Mason. Now listen to the comment, or, better, the interpretation of one of our great modern leaders, Bro. Robert I. Clegg, in his paper before the Conference of Masonic Librarians and Educators at Milwaukee last year:

When a candidate has received the Master Mason degree he has but partaken of ritualistic display. He has been shown the ground plan. He has been given the tools with which to complete the erection of a Temple for which he has previously laid the Symbolical first stone and later erected a Symbolical superstructure thereon. But, after all, this building must sooner or later be completed. It hardly seems reasonable to everlastingly pass the problem to future ages.

And to this may well be added the comment of the Grand Lodge of Iowa:

Real Masonry consists in the teachings which lie hidden behind the letter of the ritual and not in the mere ritual itself.

How many times have you heard the ritual given in such manner as clearly to demonstrate that the Master, himself, had no idea at all of its meaning?

Worshipful Master! This whole problem is primarily up to you! But, Masonic Brethren, who chooses your Worshipful Master? So often we are met with the excuse (is it really worthy the name?) of inability. There is no Master Mason whose native capacity is so limited as to prevent him from attending lodge. Also, there is no one thing in a Master's experience which heartens him so much as a good attendance, as there is, conversely, no experience that disheartens him as does non-attendance. And a second point for you fearful ones to consider: Did you ever pause to consider the handicap under which your Master works when his attention is diverted from the main issue in hand by the necessity of overseeing a multitude of minor details which you could just as well attend to as not?

Said Lavater, an xviiiith century philosopher:

If you ask me which is the real, hereditary sin of human nature, do you imagine I shall answer pride, or luxury, or ambition, or egotism? No; I shall say indolence will conquer all the rest.

At the very opening of this address, it was shown that not to our day alone are confined difficulties. The same Dr. Oliver, whose exposition on the Square has been quoted, wrote, in 1849:

It is a universal complaint, and tends to the deterioration of Freemasonry in public opinion, that amongst the numerous initiations which take place annually, so few should be prolific in bringing forth the genuine fruits of the Order....

And, further, he gives the reason:

It is because . . . they are not fully imbued with the poetry and philosophy of the Order, but prefer the dull, prosaic workings of common life, or entertain mistaken views of its nature and design.

Apathy! APATHY! APATHY!

Ruskin wrote:

This intense apathy in all of us is the first great mystery of life. It stands in the way of every perception, every virtue. There is no making ourselves feel enough astonishment at it. That the occupations or pastimes of life should have no motive is understandable; but that life

itself should have no motive, that we neither care to find out what it may lead to, nor to guard against its being forever taken away from us - here is a mystery indeed.

On the authority of the brand Master of Kentucky:

The problem that now confronts the Craft is to instill new interest and create higher ideals. Education of its members is one of the basic principles of the Order. So long as we confine our activities to conference of degrees and so long as we confine the knowledge to be acquired from the Order to the exemplification of the ritual, and rehearsal of the lectures, our members are sure to lose interest. Every lodge should have a program in which the history and teachings of the Order should play a large part, interspersed with the discussion of such secular subjects as might be deemed expedient....

Yes, every lodge should have a program; and here again, I quote from Bro. Clegg:

1. We must connect in a continuous way the activities of every lodge with that of the Grand Lodge.
2. We must provide a regular process of sustained interest to maintain the brethren at a constant rate of speed in their studies.
3. We must supply at specified dates, with the briefest practicable intervals between them, the necessary information in the form of instructive material.
4. We must furnish instructors who have a distinct capacity for that leadership which inspires growth and fruitfulness, the laudable ambition to excel for the good of all.

Fine! Fine! I can hear a lot of you think this, even though you do not express your thoughts aloud, but where get these men? My answer is: **From your own membership?**

Yes, you do have them.

No better authority can be sought than Emerson. His short essays have always remained unsurpassed. Listen to what he says regarding eloquence:

The emergency which has convened the meeting is usually of more importance than anything the debaters have in their minds, and therefore becomes imperative to them.... BUT if one of them have anything of commanding necessity in his heart, how speedily he will find vent for it, and with the applause of the assembly.

Listen to him again:

. . . in any public assembly, him who has the facts, and can and will state them, people will listen to, though he is otherwise ignorant, though he is hoarse and ungraceful, though he stutters and screams.

The next question, naturally, is as to the subject-matter to be used. Past Grand Master Frank Moses, of Iowa, states:

Our experiences teach us that fundamental truths and precepts of Masonry with liberal quotation or paraphrase of the familiar words heard so often in lodge, and apt illustration to amplify and interpret them for practical application in our daily lives, are most appreciated.

As introductory to his little volume *Era, of the Protestant Reformation*, Seebohm quotes:

CIVILIZATION means not simply advance in population, wealth, luxury . . . but far more, viz.: ADVANCE IN THE ART OF LIVING TOGETHER IN CIVIL SOCIETY.

The following pronouncement was made by the Grand Lodge of California:

We do not think that the Masonic Lodge is performing all its functions unless it includes in its work enlightenment on our origin, history and traditions.

Under this head we would also include education on the great questions of the day which are vital to our country. This does not mean that a lodge should assume a definite position, or resolve for or against any course of action as regards particular questions.

If in our daily life and in our clubs we can discuss these matters without strife, it certainly seems that we should be able to do so when within a tiled lodge.

In line with this suggestion is the comment of Dr. Lodge, of Detroit, Chairman of the Speakers' Bureau Work in Michigan:

When you get a dozen or fifty people from all over your state to consider "the Mason in his community and in his government" . . . does that not mean the community itself is going to have a little better citizen in him than before? Doesn't it mean that his government is going to have a little more independent Subject than it had before? Doesn't it mean the audience who heard these talks of the Mason in his community and in his government are going to have new sidelights on Masonry and are going to take away something that will raise their standard of citizenship ?

Here, again, for the man who insists he cannot talk; and, again, quoting Bro. Clegg:

Here is one insistent can . . . and there are many such . . . for Masonic endeavor. What shall it profit a Freemason if he vote not? Nothing is more plain than that the stay-away-from-the-polls-person is the weak link in our body politic.

To induce every brother to vote, and that he encourage all other citizens to do likewise, is our manifest and imperative duty.

We may quite properly enlarge upon the necessity of a Freemason using his franchise though we do not intrude upon his control of that privilege.

To return, for a moment, to the individual.

If you are going to have any interest, you must do it - not by lodges - but by individuals. Do you know the whole Scheme of Masonry is addressed to the individual? Nowhere in our ritual, in the matter of our Symbolic degrees, will you find anything addressed to the brothers. Everything is addressed in the singular: "Brother."

The first, second and third degrees must be conferred upon one candidate alone. It is a Symbolical fact that all great changes that come in life are encountered by us alone.... **WE MUST, in Masonry, attempt to awaken the INTEREST OF THE INDIVIDUAL.**

A most apt illustration in our national history will emphasize this imperative need. After the American colonies had declared their independence, it was necessary to formulate some machinery of government. The attempt was made under the so-called ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION.

This government failed lamentably and for very good reason. Its attempt to rule through the medium of the various individual colonies was similar to any projected plan for international administration. There was no one to put your finger on.

Only when national citizenship was provided and the federal Government could reach directly to the individual citizen was success attained.

This paper opened with Ruskin; he appeared in its midst; it is perhaps only a fair balancing proposition to introduce him again at the close.

He was quoted as realizing the distressing situation and again as finding its cause in widespread apathy. His solution puts the recovery back upon the individual, as is clearly shown in his stocktaking of himself.

For I saw that both my own failure, and such success in petty things as in its poor triumph, seemed to me worse than failure, came from the want of sufficient earnest effort to understand the whole law and meaning of existence, and to bring it to noble and due end; as, on the other hand, I saw more and more clearly that all enduring success in the arts, or in any other occupation, had come from the ruling of lower purposes not by a conviction of their nothingness but by a solemn faith in the advancing power of human nature, or in the promise, however dimly apprehended, that the mortal part of it would one day be swallowed up in immortality.

Ours is not merely an ornamental institution. Our fraternity was planted to bear fruit. **THE MASONIC FRATERNITY MUST JUSTIFY ITSELF AS A CONSTRUCTIVE POWER** in this constructive age. "The days are upon us when institutions such as ours **MUST STAND FOR SOMETHING or stand ASIDE**," says the Grand Lodge of Saskatchewan, and I will conclude with a final quotation from Bro. Clegg:

Shall the impress be upon the belief that lodges exist only to get members or upon the conviction that members shall get Freemasonry?

If the latter, what will **YOU DO** for the furtherance of Masonic Education in your lodge and in the circle of your influence?